

**South Downtown Advisory Group**  
**Meeting #2 July 13, 2005**  
**Draft Notes**

**OVERALL SUMMARY:**

The group identified many factors that have discouraged change in Pioneer Square—such as perceived lack of safety, social service concentration, zoning issues, high development costs, and restrictiveness of historic district regulations. In the Stadium Area, the group identified zoning, traffic congestion, property owners' uncertainties, and compatibility issues as contributing to existing conditions.

The advisors' discussion indicated willingness to consider changes to Pioneer Square's regulatory environment, as a way to stimulate neighborhood improvement. Changes to explore include: height limits, treating different subareas differently, Board policies and practices, design compatibility with historic character, and examining the contributing value of individual existing buildings more closely. Some expressed the need for an integrated strategy that will address safety and social service issues along with land use and zoning concerns.

New residential presence in Pioneer Square appeared to be a favored means of improving the neighborhood's quality. However, debate among the advisors indicated that more discussion of specific changes will be needed. The Stadium Area discussion did not reach conclusions about the acceptability of residential uses within currently Industrial zoned areas, but touched upon land use compatibility and road capacity concerns.

**Pioneer Square and Stadium Area: Functions, Projects and Opportunities**

Dennis Meier discussed the historical trends of growth and change, and the area's wide-ranging functions, including its historic, specialty retail, tourism, employment, entertainment, public services and transportation gateway functions. He described the First Avenue corridor as the primary street for shopping and entertainment, the Occidental Avenue green street corridor, areas north of Yesler Way as growing through conversions to residential uses, and the somewhat less-occupied areas between Second and Fourth Avenues.

Gordon Clowers described recent and proposed projects within this area. Key references:

- King County's approach to selecting a developer for the North Lot of Qwest Field.
- Nitze-Stagen's recent agreement with BNSF on the over-track development rights in the area near 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue S.

Gordon described opportunities in Pioneer Square as relating to the infill of various vacant or underused sites (primarily parking lots), which would further activate areas, increase safety, and act as catalysts in improving the atmosphere and livability of the neighborhood subareas. Key opportunities include:

- New infill development at the stadium's North Lot;
- Encouraging an enhanced mixed-use center around the transit hub at King Street Station;
- A handful of very large sites (Home Plate parking, WOSCA site and others) where new development could better define character of the Stadium Area.

## PIONEER SQUARE DISCUSSION

The group engaged in a lively and wide-ranging discussion about Pioneer Square's current conditions, and its merits and challenges as an environment for living, conducting business and developing new buildings.

### Development Climate – Identified Problems and Perspectives on Change

Initial comments by an advisor posed the questions (paraphrased) "Why aren't these vacant lots being developed—what are the specific problems?" and "What is the relevance of zoning to issues of perceived image, social services concentration and public safety?"

Discussion on the first question touched on a set of concerns relating to:

- perceived lack of safety, and a negative perception of the area by many;
- concentration of social service providers;
- low residential density and few residential-supporting services;
- the high cost of development due to small sites, bad soils, historic district designation;
- zoning said to be archaic, too restrictive and discouraging of housing;
- some property owners are disengaged and not interested in changing status quo;
- traffic congestion (due to stadiums, ferry, train delays);
- property ownership concentrated in government's hands;
- government's regulatory influence that constricts private development options.

***Zoning's relevance to non-land use issues:*** Two of the developer representatives emphasized a need to encourage infill residential developments that would change the negative perceptions of the area and create momentum for further investment in the area.

- They advocate for residential growth to create more street activity, less automobile dependence, "eyes on the street" and a safer atmosphere. They suggest the need for a new vision for the area and a new set of actions to get the ball rolling.
- They say the current zoning doesn't allow enough development capacity for them to effectively build new buildings, therefore stifling positive momentum. Their perception is that existing zoning otherwise promotes office development, which they believe would not contribute to better overall livability and 24-hour vitality.
- They suggest examining particulars, such as height limits, historic design character requirements, and the other factors they believe overly constrain developability.

Questions and comments by other advisors included:

- How will the public safety problem actually be solved?
- How will market-rate housing actually work in the context of an area with so many subsidized housing units?
- Although the media has emphasized lack of safety, Pioneer Square is actually relatively safe. There are crime and safety issues in Belltown as well, for example.

- The vicinity around the Tashiro-Kaplan Building (3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> Avenues near Washington) is an area with good prospects to develop into something better, and is also an area with opportunities to make linkages with the Chinatown/I.D. neighborhood.
- Many people that move from other U.S. cities are not afraid to live in the downtown urban setting and in fact prefer it, which helps create residential demand.
- The positive atmosphere of events like the gallery walk and Occidental weekend market days are examples of the benefits that increased residential presence could bring.

### **Architecture and Urban Design Issues**

The discussion shifted to commentary about architecture, urban design and regulatory topics.

- One advisor noted the primary importance of high-quality architectural design—saying contemporary design can be compatible with historic character, but she has seen a scarcity of good design in her six-year design review board tenure. Therefore, the discussion should either be about how to have a historic district with well-designed infill, or having no district at all.
- An architect advisor noted that designs mimicking historical qualities are usually mediocre, a Disneyland approach to preserving character. That approach was contrasted with the possibility of other well-done modern architectural statements in European cities like Amsterdam and Copenhagen. Tom Bloxham, a British urban infill developer, was mentioned ([www.urbansplash.co.uk/us.php](http://www.urbansplash.co.uk/us.php)).
- One advisor noted the possible tourism benefits of a strikingly designed building in the North Lot of the stadium, as an example of a design opportunity.
- Skeptical comments included a critique that many 1960s Modernist infill development examples in Britain are abominable.

The conversation suggested that City staff should further explore the ability to allow for well-designed architectural variety.

### ***Re-examine the historic contributing value of buildings, and district character requirements:***

The comments of some advisors also suggested re-examining the contributing value of buildings to the historic district (meaning the degree to which individual buildings contribute to overall historic character). Different treatment of non-contributing buildings was seen as potentially acceptable by some advisors.

- One advisor hoped that meant allowing easier demolition of non-contributing buildings.
- Another noted a preference to allow new buildings to complete the urban fabric rather than to retain low-quality non-contributing buildings.
- The most succinct comment by one advisor was: let's ease up on the character requirements.

### ***Sentiment in favor of looking differently at different parts of the Pioneer Square core:***

- A number of advisors agreed that First Avenue is the vicinity with the most integrity and quality as a historic urban fabric. Other areas further east have the probable presence of non-contributing buildings and a more fragmented urban fabric.

- Residential use preferences and higher height allowances (with attention to scale, density) should be explored for areas along Occidental, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenues.

Identified existing detriments to urban design and the environment:

- Illegal signage (promotional banners, etc.) that clutters the area's visual appearance;
- noise issues (needs more City attention);
- civility issues of behavior in public areas;
- traffic volumes that impair pedestrian safety

### **Other Criticism and Recommendations**

As part of reaching closure on this Pioneer Square discussion, the advisors further addressed the Preservation District Board, zoning and non-zoning issues.

**Board's processes:** The Board process was criticized by two advisors. One questioned whether the historic design standards are too strict with respect to building materials such as windows, which could discourage the possible benefits of better soundproofing or energy efficiency. This might discourage housing production. The suggestion was to relax architectural design standards.

The other advisor recommended revisiting the Board's practices, allowing more liberal actions on non-contributing buildings, and urging the Board to recognize economic impact arguments cited as rationales for demolition in the Land Use Code. In general, most of this advisor's experiences with the Boards have been negative. Another advisor with a current proposal, however, noted his recent experience has been positive, because the Board has been open to looking at rationales for demolition of a particular building (the Campbell-Fuller building).

**Zoning:** Similar to earlier input, zoning regulations were criticized by one advisor as oriented to office buildings rather than residential uses, with heights not coordinated well with construction cost considerations (e.g., it's not economical to build concrete buildings only to 100 feet).

**Need well-rounded strategy:** One advisor revisited the theme of a "neighborhood out of balance" due to social service concentration and noise issues. He believes failure is likely if this planning effort ultimately only proposes a set of zoning changes without actions and strong policy statements to address the other non-land use issues.

**Pedestrian connections:** The need for additional connections across 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue S. was noted, particularly if additional development occurs in the railroad track vicinity.

## **STADIUM AREA DISCUSSION**

### **Presentation on Stadium Area Experiences in Other Cities**

Information about stadium areas in San Diego, Denver and San Francisco was presented by Amy Lindemuth, DPD intern. Similarities with Seattle's stadium area were identified, including proximity to historic and industrial districts.

- San Diego's plan included the baseball club's commitment to facilitate development of 26 blocks of nearby area, which has now become a hotbed of residential projects.

- Denver's plan included existing zoning protections as well as new historic building protections. Area was already undergoing transition from abandoned district to a trendier character when stadium opened.
- San Francisco's plan included no public monies in stadium construction, and the baseball owner did not participate in area redevelopment. Nearby area already had market-rate housing (not substantially impacted), and another nearby vicinity already was master-planned for major redevelopment.

Conclusions to this brief analysis include:

- Historic areas can coexist with stadium areas, when protections are in place.
- The jury is still out on how much economic benefit is brought to the nearby neighborhoods by stadium activities and fans.
- We can't rule out the possibility that residential uses might fit in with stadium areas.
- However, we should recognize that none of these case study areas were located near active port facilities.

### **Overview of the Stadium Area Overlay District**

John Skelton, DPD, briefly described this zoning tool which adds supplemental regulations to the baseline zoning. The overlay district was meant to address compatibility between the stadiums and surrounding uses, with consideration given to pedestrian safety and street improvements. He asked, "What can be done to make it a more proactive tool?"

### **Highlights of the Discussion**

#### ***Commentary about mixed-use development and zone change concepts in Stadium Area:***

The Mariners' representative noted an interest in seeing a more vibrant, attractive and mixed-use character to the entire area. At the same time, he noted the compatibility challenges of Port activity, automobile and railroad activity, and a desire to avoid the potential for new development on other sites that would block views from the Stadium concourse areas.

Mr. Smith described the contrast between office uses encouraged by existing Industrial Commercial zoning on the WOSCA site, and the alternative for taller residential or mixed-use buildings that could be done with more flexible zoning. Additional design flexibility could result in more attractive or dynamic open space features. The greater traffic congestion impacts of office development would be avoided. However, residential use is not allowed by the IC zone.

The representative of the baseball stadium's Public Facilities District, challenged the advisability and need for zoning changes on the WOSCA site.

***Commentary about transportation impacts and industrial zoning:*** The SODO Business Association representative spoke about the many transportation impact issues affecting the industrial areas, including SR 519 plans, Viaduct replacement, ferry dock development, Holgate Street, monorail, light rail, etc. He is looking for effective leadership on these issues. Major WOSCA site development would be a nightmare, given traffic congestion problems. About zoning and redevelopment issues, the affected property owners are in a dilemma and don't know

what to do. They're caught between high property values and the many uncertainties about the future of their area. Another advisor characterized this situation as a "wait-and-see attitude" among the owners.

An advisor posed the questions (paraphrased): Have we acknowledged whether industrial and residential uses can mix in the same area? And, what can we say about the needs for industrial or residential uses the Stadium Area Overlay District? The ensuing commentary by a few advisors suggested that the IC-zoned Overlay District could be perceived as not essential to serve Seattle's future industrial land needs. However, the discussion was cut short by time.

Other comments contributing to the discussion included:

- Much has been asked of Pioneer Square and Chinatown/I.D. to handle the additional volumes of stadium-related activity, yet not enough has been done to mitigate problems.
- A suggestion to plan for the area as if the stadiums are not there, given a lack of stadium events many days of the year. (Subsequent comments indicated a variety of non-sport events do occur throughout the year at these venues, including the Exhibition Hall.)
- A negative critique of possible residential use in the stadium area, given the railroad activity, traffic congestion and safety considerations.

### **Comments by the Public**

After the group's discussion, members of the public were able to add their comments.

**John Chaney**, a historic preservation advocate, commented on a variety of issues. He said that the City has never put enough effort into dispersing social services or very-low-income housing away from this area. As defined in the Pioneer Square Neighborhood Plan, the mix of housing in Pioneer Square is the issue, namely getting additional market-rate housing to balance out the housing inventory and types of households present. The City's lack of action in market-rate housing for the neighborhood amounts to disinvestment. Examine the Neighborhood Plan for its holistic approach to addressing housing and the safety and social service issues.

Traffic and parking are big issues—the City should provide for supportive parking for the neighborhood, as done in Portland. It's needed because the stadium eventgoers often dominate parking resources. The stadiums have had a big impact. The nearby property owners' uncertainty is a problem. They need certainty.

The functioning of the Board is not the issue. Rather, it is a valid time to talk about topics like changing allowable building heights. This is long overdue and long hoped for. Clearly, things at the policy level need to change so that the neighborhood is put in a better position. Finally, the public should be further included in the process of deciding on change as this process goes forward. Also, this advisory group should publish public comment letters that come in.

**Christine Wolf**, a Port of Seattle seaport planner, noted the need to strongly consider land use compatibility issues with the existing Port operations, particularly traffic, light and noise issues that are unavoidable with Port activities. Container volumes have continued to grow beyond expectations, with anticipated growth due to trade.

### **Adjourn**